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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled "Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century": implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to shaping a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Statement by Catholics for Choice, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* E/CN.6/2010/1.

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Statement

Background

1. Catholics for Choice shapes and advances sexual and reproductive ethics that are based on justice, reflect a commitment to women's well-being and respect and affirm the capacity of women and men to make moral decisions about their lives. Through discourse, education and advocacy, the organization works with a global network of pro-choice Catholics in Europe and the rest of the world, including sister organizations throughout Latin America. Catholics for Choice has consultative status at the United Nations through the Economic and Social Council.

2. Catholics for Choice supports policymaking and governing structures that make a clear separation between church and state. At the same time, we also recognize that religion can make a positive contribution to law and policymaking, particularly in relation to social justice and the dignity of the human person. We strongly support the right of religious institutions to participate in the life of nations, to express their values and to inform public policy decisions. We do not think that religious organizations should be granted preferential status in policy decisions merely because they are religious.

Looking back at Beijing

3. In 1995, women from all over the world gathered in Beijing for the Fourth World Conference on Women. Non-governmental organizations, including Catholics for Choice, attended the meeting and encouraged Heads of State to implement policies that would guarantee the human rights of women. This quest for justice culminated in the Beijing Platform for Action, a global plan of action for Governments to ensure that justice for women prevails and that respect for their human rights is guaranteed.

4. The notion that women should be guaranteed full human rights caused much debate and even resistance from religious conservative delegations at Beijing. The loudest resistance came from the delegation of the Holy See.

5. At Beijing, the Vatican designated an international group of individuals to present a conservative Vatican agenda. This conference marked the first time that the Holy See's delegation was predominantly composed of women. The 1995 delegation also set a precedent by being the first to be led by a woman, who referred to the Platform for Action derogatorily as the product of "sexual libertarians, old-line feminists and coercive population controllers".

6. Despite the number of women on the Vatican's delegation, the 22 members did not bring a women's agenda to Beijing. Instead, they were mandated by the Vatican to veto any attempts to challenge positions that the Vatican has maintained, particularly with reference to issues of reproductive justice.

7. Though the Holy See delegation arrived in Beijing under directives from the Vatican to categorically and unwaveringly reject proposals that would advance the cause of reproductive justice, it claimed to speak for all Catholics, despite the great diversity of opinion among Catholics, many of whom disagree with significant aspects of church teaching.

8. In the end, though the Holy See expressed general reservations to the health section of the Platform for Action, the delegation was unable to sway States Members of the United Nations and the Platform was adopted by consensus.

The past fifteen years

9. As we look back over the past 15 years, there can be no doubt that great leaps have been made in terms of women's equality. However, there have also been significant setbacks. For every country where restrictions on abortion have been lifted, there are others that continue to prohibit this life-saving procedure. Contraception is readily available in some regions, while in others the means to time and space families are denied. Some people are learning how to prevent the transmission of HIV, while others are being fed untruths about condom use.

10. Unfortunately, in many of these instances, the Vatican has been a driving force in setting up obstacles for women, using the same backroom strategies that it employed in Beijing. And while they were unsuccessful in 1995, these strategies have been successful at times. On several occasions, Catholics for Choice has witnessed first-hand the adverse impact the Catholic hierarchy has had on women's rights throughout the world.

Millennium Development Goals

11. With regard to the Millennium Development Goals, the Vatican has proven to be just as adversarial. In September 2005, Catholics for Choice initiated an interfaith religious statement supporting the Millennium Development Goals and calling for the inclusion of reproductive health in the Goals.

12. The broad-based statement, "A faith-filled commitment to development includes a commitment to women's rights and reproductive health: religious reflections on the Millennium Development Goals", was focused on the Goals and on poverty eradication.

13. However, high-ranking Vatican officials instructed Catholic bishops to ensure that "no 'religious leader' of the Catholic church and subject to our jurisdiction agree and sign" the statement.

14. A memo articulating the Vatican's orders resulted in warnings to bishops throughout Latin America against signing the declaration. The Vatican's order put forward oft-repeated misinformation regarding United Nations definitions of reproductive health, insisting that they include abortion, and mischaracterized the religious leaders' declaration as a statement promoting abortion. The memo was leaked to the Latin American press and was widely seen as part of an ongoing effort by the Vatican to eliminate any references to reproductive health in United Nations documents.

15. These are but two examples of 15 years of strident opposition from the Vatican to women's rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights. All the while, the Vatican acts as if it speaks for all Catholics. However, common sense and poll numbers clearly prove otherwise. One poll found that 97 per cent of sexually active Catholic women have used a form of contraception banned by the church hierarchy. A poll by the United States bishops themselves found that only a paltry 11 per cent of all Americans support a total ban on abortion. Another poll by Catholics for Choice found that Catholics around the world support condom use as pro-life

because it helps prevent the spread of HIV and AIDS, including 90 per cent of Catholics in Mexico, 86 per cent of Catholics in Ireland, 79 per cent of Catholics in the United States of America and 77 per cent of Catholics in the Philippines.

Moving forward

16. Moving forward, we would like to see values that reflect the real needs of people around the world, Catholic and non-Catholic, infused into public policy. Currently the Holy See and members of the Catholic hierarchy are not lifting up these needs in their lobbying efforts. Until such a time when they do, the Commission on the Status of Women and other bodies at the United Nations must remain a strong and unwavering model for women's rights.

17. Catholics for Choice invites others to call on both the Catholic hierarchy and the States Members of the United Nations to recognize the importance of sexual and reproductive health and rights, thereby reaffirming women's equal human rights.

18. In conclusion, as the United Nations and its agencies work to secure sexual and reproductive health and rights as a key component of working towards women's full equality, Catholics for Choice commits itself to supporting these efforts through discourse, education, research and advocacy.